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ABSTRACT

This paper contains findings of a study that investigated the extent to which three schools nationally recognized for their change efforts could provide evidence of systemic change. The conceptual framework was developed from the following sources: (1) the effective-schools movement; (2) structural reform; (3) the middle-school movement; (4) curriculum, instruction, and assessment reform efforts; and (5) the literature on special-needs populations. Data were obtained from interviews with the principals, school district personnel, teachers, students, and parents; classroom observation; and document analysis. Findings indicate that structural change efforts received the most focus in the three schools. Despite engagement with the authentic-assessment movement, there was little change in curriculum and assessment practices. Finally, the schools clearly communicated their visions. A conclusion is that changing a school's philosophy and/or mission is only one step toward systemic change. Until change moves from the school-level structural arena to the classroom-level arena of curriculum and instruction, reform will continue to be piecemeal rather than systemic. One figure and a copy of the interview protocol are included. (LMI)

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Case Studies of Promising Change Schools

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There are three serious interrelated problems affecting American education at this point in history. One of these is the changing demographics of schools. As our world population shifts ever more toward non-Anglo, poor, non-educated people, the gap becomes even wider between the haves and the have-nots, highly skilled and unskilled, and even young and old (Hodgkinson, 1992). As America becomes ever more a bimodal society with self-contained suburban living the ideal, public school educators must turn to new models that recognize the nature and degree of change that is taking place and its implications for the schooling process.

A second major problem faced by American education today is the low school achievement by most of our students in those areas of learning that we have traditionally valued - reading, mathematics, science, history, and geography. In a country that ranks #1 in the world in its university programs and without peer in its premiere graduate programs, the achievement status of K-12 education is abysmal. Performance of American students on tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have provided substantial data to support the view of low achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1990).

In comparison with other countries, we clearly do not hold our own. International comparisons (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1988) reflect American students scoring next to last in mathematics at age 9, getting fewer than 60% of the items correct. In science comparisons at age 13, American students were ranked low; only students in Ireland and Jordan scored lower.

Stevenson and Stigler (1992) reported that no significant intellectual differences existed among children from the United States, Taiwan, and Japan, yet achievement differences came to light as early as first grade in

mathematics, with American students underrepresented among top scorers by about half. By fifth grade, they were underrepresented by over 30 times what would be expected.

American students do less homework than their counterparts in Taiwan, China, and Japan as early as the fourth grade and watch more television during the elementary years than most other countries. American students also engage less in critical thought, as evidenced by little emphasis on persuasive writing in elementary and middle school classrooms (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1992). Moreover, American students, even the best ones, are not required to take a foreign language in school while their European and in some instances world counterparts are becoming fluent in three languages.

A third problem affecting American education is low skilled performance of students once they are in the workforce. Part of the problem rests with the needs of our current technologically-oriented workplace. More thinking and problem-solving is required of workers in many lower paying jobs than ever before, (Reich, 1991), and the future appears to belong to the "symbolic analyst," the individual who can solve real-world complex problems, process information well, and be technologically competent in a global environment.

Senge (1991), advocates the need for systemic change in how we live and work in order to handle the implications of such global upheavals. Education reformers and policy makers see a multi-part solution to this series of problems, one that calls for systemic reforms - not just tinkering with pieces of the educational quilt.

Various research studies have been done to identify best practices in making school reform a reality. Based to a great extent on the research on effective schools (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985) and various qualitative studies of

schools (Goodlad, 1983; Oakes, 1985; Sizer, 1984), the vast majority of schools in this country are adopting key practices such as heterogeneous grouping, cooperative learning, the middle school model, and site-based management.

While these restructuring initiatives are being shaped at the local level, policy and organizational groups are at work nationally on curriculum reform. All major curriculum organizations from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) to National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) are calling for a common set of reform principles to be incorporated into standards, guides, and other curriculum documents that guide practice.

Thus, we are presented with a set of educational problems and a set of best practices derived from a variety of sources. But the fundamental question is one of reality-testing: to what extent is positive change occurring in schools, what is the evidence for it, and how systemic is it? The purpose of the study was to engage in validating the extent to which schools that were identified through national sources as "change" schools could provide evidence of systemic change.

Review of Relevant Literature

When examining the literature on educational change variables, particularly as they impact at the middle school level, it became apparent that there are competing theories and limited studies that focus on the results and impact of educational change on learners and their contexts. Most studies on middle school change are descriptive in orientation, stressing key variables that differentiate such schools from more traditional junior highs (Oates, et al., 1993; Allen, et al., 1993). In converting schools to a middle school model, studies emphasized the need for open communication and cooperation among administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community (Kochan, 1992;

Raebeck, 1992). If such communication was not established early on and maintained in the restructuring process, the increased tension could possibly lead to the demise of nascent efforts to improve school programs (Sarason, 1990).

Studies also stressed the importance of curriculum planning and decision-making as a requisite basis for successful change since the school must develop innovative methods of facilitating change in all areas of the school's curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Miller, 1992). The national standards movement has provided a blueprint for effecting such changes in all subject matter areas (Shanker, 1994). Yet practice lags substantially behind development in these areas. Alexander (1994) and Vars (1992) have cited the problems of changing assessment paradigms. Reviews of current basal curriculum materials have demonstrated their inappropriateness for moving the reform agenda forward by a continued emphasis on lower level skills and passive means of instruction (Johnson, Boyce, & VanTassel-Baska, 1995).

Another variable found in the school change literature was how to provide a positive learning environment for all students, including special populations of gifted and disabled students. Studies of gifted children have demonstrated the need for accommodating to accelerated learning, in-depth opportunities, and interactive work on issues, themes, and ideas regardless of context (VanTassel-Baska, 1993). Thus classroom practices need to individualize for these students. Current research has shown that this has not been accomplished successfully at this stage of the reform process (Archambeault, et al., 1994; Westberg, et al., 1993).

Researchers have raised many questions about how middle school inclusion will affect special education students (Idol, 1988; Louscke-Horsley & Roody, 1990; Welch, 1989) and low achievers involved in remedial programs

(Anderson & Pelicer, 1990). One teaching method widely reported to be successful at eliminating some of the problems of incorporating special education students and low achievers into the regular classroom has been cooperative teaching (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991). Yet most cooperative teaching studies focus on teacher perceptions of their own personal and professional benefits rather than outcomes of student learning.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

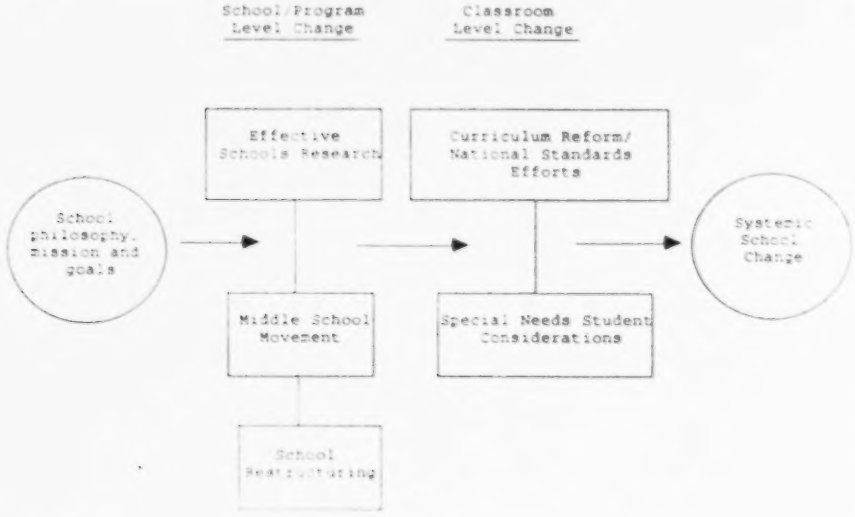
A conceptual framework was developed for this study that identified multiple sources of data about school change, available from a careful review of the literature. At the school administrative level, several sources were relevant: 1) the effective schools movement; 2) structural reform efforts; and 3) the middle school movement. At the classroom level, two other considerations were important: 4) curriculum, instruction, and assessment reform efforts; and 5) literature on special needs populations. The general movement on effecting systemic change in education was seen as an outcome of the change process being successfully implemented at various levels and through multiple approaches. It was hypothesized that schools seriously engaged in the change process would be addressing the relevant aspects of each movement as it impacted on the nature of their local efforts since each movement views change at a different level of specificity and takes into account different features of the change process.

Figure I portrays this conceptual framework, showing the relationship of each data source to the issue of overall systemic school change. This model was used as the framework for developing interview and observation protocols for the on-site team visitations to selected schools. In the study, we expected that the change practices carried out by schools would reflect back to these "best practices" found in the literature and advocated by major national

groups. Thus the framework portrays the assumptions made in the study concerning the relationships between levels and types of change occurring at school sites.

The conceptual framework guided the data collection activities and was intended to provide data on: 1) the administrative program practices that have guided the change process; 2) the use of prototypical curriculum, instructional and assessment practices in classrooms; and 3) the perceived effects of change on the functioning of learners and other stakeholders in the environment.

Figure I
Conceptual Framework for Case Studies



Sample Sites

The selection of sites for the study involved three steps. Criteria were specified for examining the key aspects of change derived from the framework. These key aspects were:

- That a positive change process had been evolving over at least five years
- That a school's philosophy and goals were stated and consensually derived

- That a school had established student expectations at each level of learning
- That student and program assessment data were used for educational improvement on a regular basis
- That systematic staff training was provided
- That parent and community education and involvement were an ongoing part of the educational program
- That the school's curriculum accommodated individual student needs
- That the instructional processes employed responded to individual learning needs
- That the school was able to provide written documentation of these criteria and entertain an on-site visitation

Nominations of sites were identified from a variety of sources that would potentially meet the criteria, specifically 1) nominations by members of the university consortium, 2) a review of literature on "change" schools, and 3) nominations from major national groups involved in the change process including Council for Basic Education, Harvard Project Zero, and the Middle School Association.

Seven potential sites were reviewed by the team, based on telephone interviews regarding the validation criteria, and three that met the study's criteria were selected for in-depth examination on-site.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was a case study approach. Case study research requires the use of multiple sources in order to validate data, studying both census and phenomenological data, and deriving themes from the data rather than from a preordained hypothesis (Denzin, 1970; Plummer, 1983; Yin, 1989). Each of these principles was adhered to in this study.

Multiple data sources in the study included: school documents, interviews with school staffs and stakeholders, and classroom observations. Major themes were derived from these sources creating triangulation. Documented findings were examined in the context of the researchers' reaction and interpretation. Three school sites were selected to study intensively. The protocols developed for the study were piloted at a fourth site.

In order to gather information concerning the ways in which identified schools were engaging in the change process, a set of interview and classroom observation questions were developed. (See Appendix A) Researchers spent approximately two days at each site. While on site, the researchers 1) interviewed school district personnel, teachers, students, and parents, 2) observed practices in at least three classrooms, and 3) reviewed available written documentation concerning the program.

Procedures

A telephone interview was conducted with the director or principal of the nominated schools. Data were recorded and written up for each site. The research team then reviewed the data and selected potential sites for visitations.

Program documents such as philosophy and mission statements, program descriptions, curriculum guides, and school handbooks were submitted by identified schools. Various data sources were examined in order to ascertain documentation of oral commentary. Written philosophy, mission, and goals statements were examined for congruity with interview data. Curriculum and instructional guides were perused. Evaluation data were examined especially as they impacted on changes in student learning. Records of team meetings, staff development agendae, and other written data were

reviewed. When available, videotapes were analyzed for evidence of the change process in action.

On-site interviews with the program director or principal were conducted. Typically the interviews lasted two hours and probed each of the major aspects of the study framework. Classroom observations were also conducted by team members while on-site. A classroom observation protocol was used to guide the time spent in classrooms. Each team member observed for 30-40 minutes in at least three classes in the school. At least nine classroom observations were conducted at each site. Observations were targeted to represent both grade level and content area diversity.

Individual/group interviews with teachers and other stakeholders in the educational change process were also held. At some sites, parents, students, and other administrators were interviewed in order to validate the school change model in action. A protocol was developed that probed the aspects of change seen as most important by the referent group.

After all data had been collected from the on-site visitations, team members met to discuss each phase of the on-site data collection, ensuring consensus on key points. Each site visit was subsequently written up using the interview protocol data, document review data, and classroom observation data as the framework for written commentary. Team meetings were held to ensure congruence with the reporting structure and content.

Finally, team members met to derive general themes and issues emerging from the three case studies. Identified themes were used as a basis to form conclusions and recommendations for school sites embarking on the change process.

Discussion of Findings Across Sites

Several themes permeated across the case studies. From the vantage point of the literature on educational change, it is clear that structural change emphases have received the most attention in the case study sites. Evidence of this was clear from the striking commonalities among the schools in such areas as theme-based curriculum, heterogeneous grouping, cooperative learning, flexible scheduling, and the use of teacher teams. The inclusion model for special education students was also in evidence in each site. These structural changes were in evidence to a greater degree than typically apparent in a random sample of schools. Not only were these changes in place; the rationale behind the changes was articulated throughout interviews and embedded within philosophy, goals, and statements of school purpose. These structural ramifications of the change process were clearly related to "change" in that the schools consciously expressed a transition from some form of "old" practice to some form of "new" practice.

All sites set a high premium on communication: among teachers; between teachers and administrators; between teachers and students; among teachers, administrators, and parents; and the myriad levels of communication necessary among these groups. Additionally, the studied sites made particular efforts to inform the public-at-large as to the success of their innovations. There was also a clear attempt to make these sites student need-centered where students felt wanted and cared about, a clear outgrowth of staff use of positive communication approaches.

Another theme emerging from these case studies relates to the concept of time and personal commitment. It was in evidence at all sites that principal and staff commitment was unusually high, both in respect to putting in whatever extra time was required to make change happen but also the fervor

with which the ideas went forward. In each site there was a cadre of people who put their lives on the back burner in order to succeed at the task of school change. Before and after school meetings, summer experiences, extra preparation for innovations were the standard of these schools. It is questionable that the level of energy and time expended to make the changes observed at each site can be continued indefinitely at these sites or that such behavior can be replicated on a widespread basis in other educational contexts.

One of the key issues raised by this study is the underlying assumption that change is good, that it contributes to the positive development of the school community and the learning needs of students. There seems to be no question that change is needed and if made, will improve school performance. However, the test of that does not appear to have been made. Improved affective perceptions and restructured organizational practices do not equal more or better learning by themselves.

As educators, we have tended to believe that the central problem of education lay between theory and practice, that this dichotomy represented our most difficult challenge to bridge. Based on these case studies, it appears that the greater problem lay in the gulf between the articulation of practice and actual practice itself. At each site, practitioners talked as if certain aspects of positive change were in place, but they were not always found at either the observation or document level. The most glaring omission noticed was quantitative or qualitative evidence of actual learning gains for students. There is little evidence that any structural changes made have improved student achievement scores. The sites had much "perceptual data" on the improvement in the school's affective atmosphere, but there appears to have been little tracking of what types of specific academic gains students have made.

There was an amazing level of sophistication by all constituencies at all sites in discussing the school's philosophy, mission, and goals. There seemed a genuine understanding of the school's purposes and the philosophy upon which those purposes were predicated. But one striking theme emerging from these case studies was the limited emphasis in the area of curriculum and instructional change. Codification of curricular and instructional changes was not in evidence. The National Standards projects were not mentioned as curricular blueprints. Rather, the notion of theme-based curriculum was the most pervasive curricular innovation tried. Even with that, it was teacher-developed and articulated as being "in flux;" i.e., there was little formal written curriculum.

All of the sites were involved to some degree with the authentic assessment movement. Technologically innovative portfolio assessments were in evidence along with embryonic rubric templates. However, little progress was noted toward using these assessments as a basis for curricular change or learning improvement. Reliance on basal materials still permeated these school sites and traditional instructional practices were the standard mode of delivery (text-driven instruction to large groups of children) noted during classroom observations. There were notable exceptions, such as the one school which emphasized project-based instruction. But actual instruction lagged behind articulation of what instruction should be.

Lack of emphasis on curriculum and instruction reinforces the difference between school and classroom change. The change process in each of these sites was spearheaded by a principal of extraordinary personal power and influence driven by a personal vision of how the school needed to change. At all sites it took this individual at least five years to effect the school level changes that were found. Moreover, each of these individuals had the common

traits of being articulate about the nature of change they were trying to effect, willing to take risks in their attempts to bring about change, passionate in their beliefs, and dogged in pursuing their goals. Thus the notion of the necessity of the change agent within a system was clearly in evidence.

The study found schools that knew what they wanted to be about. The level of philosophy and mission was strong and well articulated. The level of practice and codification was less clear. The unevenness of philosophy in practice seems related to the unevenness of teacher ability to implement changes necessary to the classroom level of instruction. There was also an uneven availability of curricular materials which would support postive curriculum change. Thus, curriculum design is in the hands of the teachers, hands often tied by the constraints of limited training and few materials.

Conclusion

These three case studies have informed our understanding of the dynamic use of the educational change philosophy. The studies have documented both the nature and extent of change occurring and the issues and problems associated with it. They have provided a blueprint for action in some areas and created more questions in others. Each of the sites, however, has provided a clearer sense of how some schools are striving for self-improvement through focusing on individual student needs and appear to be succeeding.

One lesson that emerged is that changing a school's philosophy and/or mission is only one step toward systemic change. Having a coherent mission, even under the guidance of a visionary leader, does not complete the school reform process. The level of change necessary needs to trickle into each classroom. This will not happen until curriculum and instruction are reformed in the same manner that structural organization has been reformed.

These case studies also demonstrate the dynamic nature of school change. Just deciding it has to happen and instituting policies to enable it to happen is only the beginning. The schools we investigated all have a national reputation as front-runners in the national school reform movement and yet all see themselves as "in process." The search for a better way does not seem to end; it is indeed an on-going process. But it is a process that will only be meaningful if it can insure some measure of solving the problems presently plaguing American education. Therefore, changes must be rooted in meeting the needs of a demographically diverse population; improving student academic achievement; and creating a more skilled workforce. This is the challenge yet to be met. Until change moves from the school level structural arena to the classroom curriculum and instruction arena, reform will continue to be piecemeal rather than systemic.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

_____Parents/Teachers/Administrators
_____Interview Team

Interview Protocol
Indicators of the Change Process in Schools

Leading Question: What areas of your school have changed in the last five years? Number of years involved in the change process? How much change has occurred?

A. The Planned Change System

Organizing question for section: *What processes of change have you implemented?*

_____1. The school staff engages in collaborative planning.
_____2. The school uses shared governance techniques.
_____3. The school promotes empowerment of teachers and other staff.
_____4. The school has a consensually derived and stated philosophy and goals.
_____5. School leadership approaches are consistent with planned change efforts.
_____6. How satisfied are you with the changes made during the last five years?
_____7. What was your level of involvement in the school's planning for change?
_____8. What strategies were used during the school's decision-making process?
_____9. Did you feel valued by others involved in the change process?
_____10. What were the barriers to change?
_____11. How did you overcome barriers to change?

B. The Family Support System

Organizing question for section: *What kind of family support system does the school have?*

_____1. The school provides a parent education program.
_____2. The school involves parents in the instructional process.
_____3. The school has an active parent volunteer program.
_____4. The school encourages parent-teacher exchanges.
_____5. Families are involved in monitoring child's progress.
_____6. Families are involved with the learning process.
_____7. Families provide encouragement and incentive to children.

Other Notes:

C. The Quality of Schooling (Effective Schools)

Organizing question for section: *What are the indicators that your school is an effective school?*

_____1. The school promotes a healthy climate.
_____2. The principal is an effective leader.
_____3. Cooperative learning is used in classrooms.
_____4. Peer tutoring is employed.
_____5. Coaching models are in evidence.
_____6. The principal and teachers have high expectations for student performance.
_____7. Grouping strategies are flexible, using heterogeneously grouped classrooms.
_____8. Special needs populations are served through individualized approaches.

Other Notes:

D. The Assessment Process

Organizing question for section: *What assessment processes does the school use?*

_____1. Use of authentic as well as standardized measures (multiple approaches).
_____2. Used for enhancing instruction.
_____3. Use of performance-based activities.
_____4. Use of individual student portfolios.
_____5. Rubrics for scoring have been developed, piloted, and implemented.
_____6. Special needs populations are assessed at appropriate levels.

Other Notes:

E. Curriculum

Organizing question for section: *What curriculum approaches does the school use?*

_____1. The curriculum is problem-centered, flexible, and culturally sensitive.
_____2. The curriculum uses community resources.
_____3. The curriculum focuses on concepts and issues emphasizing depth and breadth.
_____4. The curriculum is interdisciplinary.
_____5. The curriculum incorporates technology.
_____6. The curriculum uses materials and resources that support the above elements.
_____7. Special needs students are considered in choosing curriculum materials, strategies, and activities.

Other Notes:

F. Instruction

Organizing question for section: *What types of instruction does the school use?*

_____1. Instruction employs hands-on, use of manipulatives.
_____2. Instruction employs inquiry-oriented techniques.
_____3. Instruction employs the use of cooperative strategies.
_____4. Instruction employs individualized approaches based on need.
_____5. Instruction employs an emphasis on construction of meaning.
_____6. Instruction employs use of metacognitive strategies.
_____7. Adaptations in instruction for special needs students are considered.

Other Notes:

G. Staff Development

Organizing question for section: *What do you do for staff development? How do you judge the effectiveness of it?*

_____1. Interactive involvement of participants.
_____2. Needs assessment data are used to determine goals.
_____3. Presenters represent a combination of local, state, and university-based expertise.
_____4. Participants are engaged in active learning and reflection.
_____5. There are follow-up procedures.
_____6. Staff development sessions are mandatory.
_____7. There is a staff development plan.
_____8. External visitations are used as a tool for staff development.
_____9. Staff development is conceived of as multi-leveled and on-going.
_____10. There is staff development related to special needs students.